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SUBJECT: NAJAF'S KUFU UNIVERSITY: DOORS WIDE OPEN

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Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d), (g)

This is a PRT Reporting Cable

11. (C) SUMMARY: The President of Najaf's Kufa University (Kufa) warmly welcomed the PRT delegation, including Team Leader and PD officer, during a November 21 campus visit. President Razak Al-Essa, who attained his PhD in the U.K., openly discussed his Western-oriented education model with PRT Leader and stated that he welcomes U.S. involvement in helping build Kufa into a first-class institution. He specifically requested the PRT's assistance in setting up a TOEFL English-testing center at Kufa, acquiring English references and periodicals for the library, and engaging his professors and students in exchange programs. Dr. Razak was ready to welcome the PRT anywhere on the six campuses, but PRT Leader had to decline his impromptu invitation to visit the other campuses until its security teams can advance the other sites. END SUMMARY

University Condition, Student Composition

12. (U) Kufa is one of Iraq's well-known universities, comprising 12 faculties and accommodating 10,600 students. Management at Kufa expects a thirty percent increase in admissions to 4,100 students in 2008, due to a sharp increase in high school commencement rate. According to Dr. Razak, whereas previously, the commencement rate was only five percent nationwide, this rate has increased to eighteen percent last year, and he expects the rate to remain the same. He worried that Iraq would have a total of 112,000 high school graduates next year, but only 90,000 university seats available for them. Najaf province itself is experiencing a surge of thirty percent in high school graduates.

13. (C) In order to accommodate the surge of graduating youth, and "keep them off the streets", Dr. Razak's Committee opened a Kufa "night school" last year, with the stipulation that the student composition will be eighty percent from within Najaf province, and twenty percent from out-of-state. This night school will increase from 600 students to 1,200 students next year. With the night school, Kufa university management has the flexibility to make its own admissions decisions without taking directives from the Ministry of Education. In addition, Dr. Razak, with the coordination of several of his faculties, held a soft opening of a polytechnic school in Najaf city, which currently hosts 75 students, in accounting and finance courses. Dr. Razak lamented that the bureaucratic Ministry of Education was not amenable to Kufa's extension to vocational training and is offering no budget to help defray the costs.

14. (U) Kufa owns several parcels of land totaling 2.5 million

square meters. Currently, three major buildings are under construction to host six faculties on six campuses that are within walking distance from one another; the auditorium in which the PRT meeting took place was completed only six months ago. It hosts academic as well as social activities, in addition to religious 'hawza' events. The university also successfully reclaimed a building that U.S. troops have used. Kufa hosts an English website, www.kuiraq.com, demonstrating the university's progressive nature.

Immediate Needs of the University

¶5. (C) Dr. Razak highlighted the recent popularity among students of "English certificates." He insisted that Kufa should be a Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) site in South-Central, and asked the PRT to assist in this project. Dr. Razak stated that he welcomes American or international proctors on site during testing session. Students must travel to Baghdad currently to take the TOEFL test, which can be both costly, and dangerous. Secondly, Dr. Razak, along with the head of the English department, pleaded for English books for the department's library - especially references and periodicals. The English department comprises four professors and six lecturers; the department head is Ikhlās Ali, a female fluent in English.

Longer-term Projects?

¶6. (C) Dr. Razak opined that before 2003, professors had no motivation for professional training, but now his English professors are eager to participate in U.S. visiting or exchange scholar programs, or to hold videoconferences to "interact with native speakers." Even among the students, Dr. Razak indicated that resentment to studies in English has turned into enthusiasm since 2003. He reacted supportively to the mentioning of Fulbright and other ECA programs, stating that one medical student and one professor are currently nominees of the IVLP

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program. When the PRT described a typical American Corner setup, he welcomed that idea as well.

¶7. (U) Kufa's Head of Communication, Laith Kadhum, informed the PRT that it was only six months ago that his staff set up internet access on campus. One big improvement was the provision to all staff members, including lecturers, internet accounts; many students, however, were left without the privilege. Kadlum lamented that his biggest hurdle is setting up inter-connectivity among the six physically separate campuses. Laying down fiber optics cable and other infrastructure are very costly, costing an estimated USD1 million, for which he stated Kufa lacks the funds. For immediate needs, he has requested funds from Baghdad for the purchase of 250 computers.

Biography: Dr. Razak J. Al-Essa

¶8. (C) President Razak's open-mindedness and Western-orientation was easily evident to his interlocutors; in addition, he enjoys the friendship and support of Najaf's progressive governor. During the meeting, the female students and professor present held no reservation in voicing their frustration with issues of gender inequality. Dr. Razak chimed in the discussion, and opined his disagreement in a manner reminiscent of a mentor-mentee relationship in any Western institution - all in English. Dr. Razak, who became President of Kufa University in 2006, held the positions of Assistant Professor, Professor, and head of the Chemistry department at Kufa since 1980. Born on July 1, 1949, in Shamiyah, Diwaniya province, Dr. Razak attained a BSc in Chemistry at Basrah University and a PhD in Chemistry (Organometallic) at Liverpool University, U.K. From 1978 to 1979, he was a visiting scholar to the University of Western Ontario in Canada. Dr. Razak lives in Najaf and is married.

¶9. (C) Comment: President Razak is ready to cooperate with any educational activities to strengthen his institution. He told PRT Leader in a subsequent phone call that he would welcome the opportunity to have PRT ROL experts offer lectures to his law school students either at Kufa or at the REO. Kufa's Engineering Faculty will soon be housed in a 2006 ESF project. The President also welcomed an offer to allow his agricultural school students to attend REO agricultural conferences, and the opportunity for his nursing school students to participate in international exchanges. There appears to be considerable opportunity for interaction with Kufa University which the PRT will begin exploring - but carefully and with due consideration - making sure no more is attempted than the traffic will bear.

¶10. (C) COMMENT Cont'd: Particularly interesting is President Razak's interest in serving Najaf's reconstruction and development needs by starting a polytechnic and a night school division. At one point during the meeting, Dr. Razak lamented that Kufa and other universities in the South Central region have been neglected. He added positively, however, that the Ministry of Education recently signed an agreement to promote Kufa as the leading university - nationally. In any case, the open-minded attitude that Kufa University's leadership, faculty, and students expressed matches the aspirations of other sophisticated Najafis the PRT had encountered, and the PRT intends to support these aspirations as much as possible. END
COMMENT
SIMMONS